

Minuteman Missile

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Minuteman Missile
National Historic Site
Western South Dakota



Hidden In Plain Sight

For nearly three decades South Dakotans, tourists and truckers drove up and down Interstate 90 and hardly gave a second thought to the fact they were driving through a nuclear missile field. With the advent of Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) the front lines of the Cold War were everywhere. The specter of nuclear armageddon haunted the United States for decades. Minuteman Missile National Historic Site tells the story of the Minuteman weapons system and its role in enhancing America’s strategic commitment to world peace during that troubled time.

Cold War 101

“In the thermonuclear age, any misjudgement on either side about the intentions of the other could rain more devastation in several hours than has been wrought in all the wars of human history.”
John F. Kennedy, 1961

The history of the Cold War is still being written. For the millions of people who lived through the Cold War, memories and images remain: duck and cover drills, the Cuban Missile Crisis, President Nixon’s 1972 trip to China, the 1980 U.S. Olympic hockey team’s upset victory. In the years since the fall of the Berlin Wall – largely seen as the beginning of the end of the Cold War – scholars have been uncovering documents that shed new light on this conflict of global impact.

Unlike a conventional or “hot” war, the Cold War does not have exact starting or ending dates, direct military encounters, or casualty counts. Instead, the Cold War is commonly understood as an ideological, economic, and political struggle between the United States’ democratic capitalism and the totalitarian communism of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR).

This era was marked by the nuclear arms race, human rights abuses as well as numerous proxy wars and conflicts that were fought in such diverse countries as Angola, Afghanistan, Cuba, Korea, and Vietnam. Always, the awesome might of nuclear weapons influenced policy makers worldwide.

Nuclear Strategy

“A nuclear-missile silo is one of the quintessential Great Plains objects: to the eye, it is almost nothing, just one or two acres of ground with a concrete slab in the middle and some posts and poles sticking up behind an eight-foot-high Cyclone fence; but to the imagination, it is the end of the world.” Ian Frazier, 1989

The Minuteman II missile was part of the triad of missiles, bombers, and submarine launched nuclear weapons developed for defense of the United States. Due to innovative solid-fuel technology, the Minuteman II could be deployed in remote unstaffed underground silos and launched by crews stationed at launch control facilities miles away. Designed to travel over the North Pole and arrive at its target in thirty minutes. Its 1.2 megaton warhead carried the explosive power of over one million tons of dynamite.

The men and women of the United States Air Force (USAF) were very aware of the destructive capabilities of the Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles (ICBMs) that were entrusted to their care. Trained to respond immediately to any scenario, officers on duty in the launch control center (LCC) found themselves faced with what missileers have described as “hours and hours of sheer boredom punctuated by seconds of panic.”

Many people believed that the United States would not launch a first strike at an enemy nation and that our vast array of weapons would intimidate any enemy from attacking the United States. Known as “deterrence” during the Cold War, this strategy required that America’s nuclear forces be maintained at a constant state of readiness, a practice that continues to the present day.

The Missile Next Door

Nuclear weapons, controversial from the day the world first learned of their existence in 1945, changed not only warfare, but the way humans understood life on Earth. The mushroom cloud these weapons produce upon detonation has become an icon of not only the Cold War, but also of fear, chaos, and death.

To the people of the Great Plains, missiles were not merely symbolic. Living beside ICBM silos, community members adapted in different ways to

the threat of nuclear war. While most gave the weapons little thought, some joined anti-nuclear organizations. Others came to feel that the missiles represented security and were dismayed when the Minuteman IIs were deactivated.

Although there are no longer any active ICBM silos in South Dakota, 500 nuclear missiles are still deployed in the upper Great Plains, a reminder that the end of the Cold War era did not bring hoped for peace and security to the United States.

Missile Myths

Because nuclear weapons sites were under high security, most civilians developed their understanding of missiles from popular movies like *War Games* (1983) and *Dr. Strangelove Or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964). As is often the case, the “Hollywood version” of life around missiles often could be misleading and inaccurate.

“Top Secret”

The missile facilities are easily seen from Interstate 90 and were not disguised in any way. The existence of the sites and their capabilities were not unknown. In fact, the sites were filmed for nationally televised broadcasts and the USAF gave tours during “Community Days.” Three elements of the system were top secret – the specific targeting of each missile, whether or not individual missiles had nuclear warheads, and the procedures necessary to execute a launch.

“The Button”

Although the phrase “finger on the button” has become common, there is no button used to launch an ICBM. Launch requires the proper authentication codes and two keys, turned simultaneously by two officers in the underground LCC. At the same time, two officers in another LCC must also turn their own two keys to successfully launch a missile.

In almost every movie involving a missile launch, one officer is shown hesitating to turn the key, frozen in fear of the implications of that action. In reality, launch control officers were frequently tested. As a result, if so ordered, they would launch a missile without reservation. The words of now retired USAF Major Steven Hall were echoed throughout the missile field, “there absolutely would be no hesitation on anybody’s part to do what they needed to do.”

Why This Site?

Under the terms of the Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (known as the START Treaty), signed by American President George H.W. Bush and Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev in 1991, the United States and the USSR began to reduce their stockpiles of nuclear arms.

As deactivation of Minuteman II missile sites progressed, employees of the USAF and the National Park Service worked toward preservation of a representative site to illustrate the history and significance of the Cold War, the arms race, and the dedication of USAF personnel.

After years of effort, this process culminated with the signing of the Minuteman Missile National Historic Site Establishment Act of 1999, creating the nation’s 379th National Park Service unit. The site is the first to be dedicated exclusively to the events of the Cold War.

Delta-01 Launch Control Facility and Delta-09 Launch Facility were selected for preservation from the 450 Minuteman II missile sites nationwide because:

- they were the most typical and least altered from the original 1961 Minuteman missile configuration,
- they are located near a major traffic corridor (Interstate 90), which allows for easy access by the visiting public, and
- they are situated near an existing National Park Service unit – Badlands National Park – which allows for shared administrative and management functions.

Plan Your Visit

Tours: Tours of Delta-01 and Delta-09 are offered year round. During the summer season (Memorial Day – Labor Day) two tours are offered daily. During the Spring, Fall and Winter one tour is offered daily. All tours begin at the Park Project Office off of Interstate 90, exit 131. Tour availability is extremely limited. Please call ahead to reserve your spot.

Contact us: Minuteman Missile NHS
21280 SD Hwy. 240
Philip, SD 57567
605-433-5552
www.nps.gov/mimi
mimi_information@nps.gov

Related Sites: The South Dakota Air and Space Museum at Ellsworth Air Force Base has many displays and artifacts related to the Cold War era. These include exhibits about the Minuteman. It also maintains the former missile wing’s training launch control center. Visitors can also tour an underground training silo. Contact the Air and Space Museum at 605-385-5188.